

Christ the Way:
Reflections on John 14, St Augustine, and Synodality
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Synodality is an ecclesial matter in the most practical sense. How to be sowers, how to be hospitable to the birds of the air, how to cultivate the local soils that make up the Universal Church, that the tree might grow to full stature.

The key term “Synodos” derives from a Greek combination of two words *σὺν* (*sún*, “with”) (English *syn-*) + *ὁδός* (*hodós*, “way, path”). It has come to mean the assembly itself gathered, yet its roots contextualize this as “the pathway with”, that is to say, a pathway with others, or taken together. If we speak constructively of a more Synodal church, we are speaking in terms of a Church more actively engaged in all her members in walking together the Way of Christ.

Which leads us to the sources of these reflections I will offer. Christ Jesus speaks of himself as the *hodós*, (*via* in Latin, *way* in English) in John 14, and there is an extensive body of patristic theological work on sounding the depths of this self-description. To read someone like Augustine on Jesus saying “I am the way, the truth and the life” is to step into a world of Scriptural reflection quite different from our own. This unfamiliarity presents interpretive challenges for us; but it also offers us an opportunity to step outside our usual perspectives and habitual ways of phrasing things.

What follows are some rough notes and reflections on things Augustine develops. The text of Augustine is in bold type; my notes are in regular type. I’ll talk about some of the notes. The others are for your reflection. Thus, I want to spend some time with you in a kind of *Lectio Divina*, exploring Christ the Way with the help of Augustine’s explication to his own people of parts of John 14. The aim is to enjoy something beautiful and profound in our tradition, to learn from it, and to encourage is all to explore more deeply the Way of the Church in the light of the WAY of Christ, which, I think, is what Augustine would most want for us.

Augustine, like many patristic authors, was a pastoral theologian. His sermons are where we will find him most lively. Hippo was not a great city, nor his hearers great theologians. They were villagers, he loved them, and he wanted to explain the Scriptures and the mysteries they teach, to them. I would like to begin, then, with a little passage from St Augustine's tractate on the first letter of John where he says the following:¹

St Augustine: On the first epistle of St John Tr. 1. 9 (1 Jn 2,6)

He who says that he remains in him, must walk as he walked. In what way, brothers? What does he admonish us? He who says that he remains in him, that is, in Christ, must walk as he walked. Maybe he admonishes us to walk on the sea? Don't even think it! In fact, he admonishes us to walk on the path of justice. In what path? I have already reminded you. He was nailed immobile to the cross, and on this path he walked: this is the path of charity.

Notable about this passage:

- ◆ The familiarity with which he addresses his people
- ◆ Walking the way: not to be taken too literally
- ◆ Justice (in a wide Scriptural Sense)
- ◆ Charity (as the fullness of God's love for us given on the Cross)
- ◆ The New life generated in us at baptism
- ◆ Immobility as paradoxically the fullness of Christ's Way.
- ◆ Christ's justice and charity are displayed, *along his way*, in his actions, words, and in culminating fashion "immobile on the Cross"
- ◆ The panorama of his life is a showing of Justice and Charity.

¹ All translations from the Latin © 2024 Bishop Daniel E. Flores. All rights reserved. Original Latin can be found at https://www.augustinus.it/spagnolo/index_lat.htm

St Augustine, Tractate 69,1, on John 14, 3-4:

[...] Therefore he had said: *And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, you may also be. And you know where I am going, and you know the way. To this Thomas says: Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?*

The Lord had said that they knew the one thing and the another; (*where he is going, and the way to get there*) Thomas says that he knows neither the place where he is going, nor the way he is taking.

But the Lord does not know how to lie; they, therefore, knew, yet they did not know that they knew. So as to convince them that they know what up to this point they think they do not know, Jesus says to him: *I am the Way and the Truth and the Life.*

Notable about this passage:

- ◆ It is possible, perhaps even a common experience for us as Christians not to know what we know.
- ◆ The Lord's response to the disciples suggests that in order to know what we think we do not know we must enter more deeply into Christ.
- ◆ As St Paul says (Col 2, 2-3): *for the knowledge of the mystery of God, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.*
- ◆ In this case it is about knowing in Christ where we are going and how to get there.

There we have heard the disciple ask, we have also heard the Master teach, but even after having heard the sounded phrase, we still do not understand the hidden sense of what he says.

Notable about this passage:

- ◆ The *hidden sense* here is not referring to allegory or the four senses of Scripture (though they are related); rather, as we will see shortly, he refers to understanding in a spiritual way the things Jesus says. Basically, this is equivalent to being taught by the Spirit what Jesus is speaking about.
- ◆ Although the Holy Spirit is not mentioned in these passages we are looking at, the Spirit is present in the disciples, leading them more deeply into Christ.
- ◆ This is relevant to our Synodal pursuit of Conversations in the Spirit, or spiritual conversations.
- ◆ A Conversation in the Spirit, for Augustine, is like what he had with St Monica in the Garden before she became ill.
- ◆ It is also focused on savoring the mysteries of faith in common.
- ◆ In this sense, practical decision-making is “in the Spirit” to the extent that it is informed by the Mysteries of Christ’s life, passion, death and resurrection.
- ◆ These are mysteries we hear in the Scriptures (the rule of faith), and consume in the Eucharist.

But what, then, can we not understand? Could his apostles, with whom he spoke, say to him: "We do not know you"?

Notable about this passage:

- ◆ Of course they couldn't say this, because they had been with him, and they knew him. This is a significant point. They would be untruthful if they said they did not know him. But they do not know in what way he is the Way. There is more to Christ than what they at that moment perceive, or that we at any moment perceive.

Therefore, if they knew him and he in his very self is the Way, they knew the Way; If they knew him and he in his very self is the Truth, they knew the Truth; If they knew him and he in his very self is the Life, they knew the Life.

Notable about this passage:

- ◆ Thus Augustine takes us back to the truth that to know the way is by way of knowing Christ more deeply, of seeing more in him than at first we might have perceived.
- ◆ This is the work of the Spirit that enlightens the mind and inclines the heart to a deeper, more participative sense of the whole mystery he embodies.
- ◆ Contemplative silence enters where words fail us, and from the silence spiritual understanding emerges.
- ◆ In the theological tradition that flows through and from Augustine, St Catherine of Sienna's Dialogue is an outstanding example of this.

Here they were convinced that they knew what they did not know they knew.

Notable about this passage:

- ◆ The Lord convinces them in that he convicts them by the statement he makes.
- ◆ There is a not knowing of Christ that shows itself, at his prompting, through our very knowing of him. Only by learning what we do not know, we can begin to know it.

2. Therefore, what have we not understood in this saying, either?

What do you think, except that he said: *And you know where I am going and you know the way?*

And behold, because they knew the same one who is the Way, we know that they knew the Way; but the way is through that which one goes; is the way, then, also [the place] where one goes?

Notable about this passage:

- ◆ This is the paradox of the Church's faith in the Incarnation, which Augustine will unfold in the course of the rest of the sermon.
- ◆ Christ, in himself, is both way and destination.

**Now, he had said that they knew one thing and another, where
he is going and the way.**

**It was, therefore, necessary for him to say "I am the Way," to
show that those who knew him, knew the Way that they
assumed they did not know;**

**On the other hand, because, knowing the path by which he
would go, it remained to know where he would go.**

**Why was it necessary for him to say "I am the Way and the
Truth and the Life", if not because he was going to the Truth,
and he was going to the Life?**

Notable about this passage:

- ◆ Quite simply: The Paschal Mystery
- ◆ We have to understand Christ as the Way in light of Christ as the aim of the journey (the Truth and the Life).
- ◆ Truth and Life are things we participate now. In him.
- ◆ This participation in the Truth and Life of Christ the End is what makes possible our journey on his way.
- ◆ Present participation in the Truth and Life is a dynamic active in our present decision making with a forward movement towards fullness.

He went, therefore, to himself through himself.

And us, where do we go but to him?

And through where do we go if not through him?

**Therefore he was going to himself, and he was going through
himself;**

and we, we go to him and through him;

better said, he and we go to the Father.

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**Indeed, of himself he says in another place: *I go to the Father*
(Jn 16,10).**

And in this passage he affirms this in reference to us: *No one comes to the Father except through me* (Jn 14,6).

**And, therefore, he through himself to himself and to the Father,
and we, through him to him, and to the Father.**

Notable about this passage:

- ◆ This rather dense passage should remind us of the great “Through him, with him and in him” that is sung by the priest after the Consecration and before the Great Amen of the people.
- ◆ Liturgically, at that moment, we go with Christ to the Father.
- ◆ At stake here is the realism of our being incorporated into Christ.
- ◆ His way for us is his humanity, accessible to us through the Holy Spirit’s action of uniting us to his body. This occurs at Baptism, culminating in the Eucharist.
- ◆ But his humanity is lived in us precisely as humanity united to the divine person of the Son who is himself one with the Father, though he is not the Father.
- ◆ The Spirit’s action is a continual drawing us into Christ. Who by his accessible humanity leads us to praise the mystery of the Triune Godhead.
- ◆ The way of salvation “through Christ” is exactly that, a Way. It does not culminate in one moment until the finality of our union as a people to Christ, our finality as Truth and Life. This coincides with the historical finality described in the Book of Revelation.
- ◆ The Sacred Liturgy, however, enacts a real anticipatory share in the end (through Him, in Him etc) in the here and now offering of Christ in his body (we are in his body) to the Father by the Spirit.
- ◆ Also, this Way for us is identically the journey within which we live out our communion as his Body, the Branches on the Vine (Jn 15), and our mission to bring all things together in Christ : “*he has made known*

to us the mystery of his will in accord with his favor that he set forth in him as a plan for the fullness of times, to sum up all things in Christ, in heaven and on earth” (Ephesians, 1,10).

- ◆ Our work, in our here and now, is both announcement and sign of the Christ who is himself in his totality, head and body, the way through to the fullness of the Kingdom.

**Who understands this but the one who understands spiritually?
And how much does such a one grasp, even if he understands
spiritually?**

**My friends, why do you want me to explain this to you? Think
how excellent these things are.**

You see what I am, I see what you are;

***In all of us, the corruptible body dulls the soul and the earthly
habitation weighs down the mind that thinks on many things
(Wisdom 9,15).***

**Do we suppose that we can say: *I lifted up my soul to you who
dwell in heaven? (Ps 122,1).***

**But here where we groan, overwhelmed under so much weight,
how will I lift up my soul, if he who laid down his own soul for
me does not lift me up?**

**I will say, therefore, what I can; From among you, make your
own what you can.**

**I say what is given, understand the given, whoever can
understand it, and let the one who does not yet understand the
sense, believe, since the prophet affirms: *If you do not believe,
you will not understand (Is 7,9 LXX).***

Notable about this passage:

- ◆ Faith leads to Reflection, and reflection leads to understanding, but understanding in this life is partial and incomplete.
- ◆ For a deep retrieval of synodality, reflection on the mystery of Christ as revealed in the Scriptures and taught by the Church (in the Creed, for example) is indispensable.
- ◆ The spiritual mind makes decisions and conducts daily life with the Charity and Justice of Christ in the soul.
- ◆ These are gifts that must be prayed for and cultivated in the body of the Church so as to become the effective sign of Christ the Head, Crucified and Risen.
- ◆ We do not go our own way, we go Christ's way to the Father in the Spirit, who is sent to deepen our apprehension of who he is and what he gives us.
- ◆ We are equipped for the mission by Christ who incorporates us into himself.

For March 6

Next time, I will talk about number 3 of Tractate 69 (given below).

- ◆ I urge you to notice the importance Augustine places on the flesh of Christ. He refers to Christ's entire human nature. What does it mean for us that human flesh, its particular manifestation in time and place is the hinge and meeting point between God and us? What does it mean for us that the human mystery of Christ is the vehicle of salvation in our world today?
- ◆ What does this say about our unity in his body, about our mission, about how we go about it, and what we prioritize?

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3. Tell me, my Lord, what I will say to your servants, my fellow servants.

**The apostle Thomas had you before him so he could ask you;
However, he would not understand you if he did not have you in him;**

**I question you because I know that you are above me;
Now, I ask that to the extent I can, I pour out my soul above me, where
though you make not a sound, I can still hear to you teaching.**

Please tell me how do you go to yourself?

**Are we to think that in order to come to us, you abandon yourself?
especially because you came not on your own, but because the Father
sent you?**

**I know certainly that you emptied yourself, but because you assumed the
form of a slave, not because you left the form of God to which you
returned, nor because you lost what you recovered;
and yet you came and reached not only the eyes of the flesh, but also you
truly arrived into the hands of men.**

How else but in the flesh?

Through this you came, although you remained where you were;

Through this you returned without leaving the place where you had
come.

If, then, through this you came and returned,
through this, without a doubt, you are not only for us the Way by which
we came to you,

but you were also for you the Way by which you came and returned.

On the other hand,
when you went to Life, which is you in yourself, you actually led that
same flesh of yours from death to life.

In effect, God the Word is one thing, man is another;
but the Word became flesh, that is, man.

Thus, there is not one person of the Word, another person, the man,
because each of the two is Christ, the one person;
and, therefore, when the flesh died, Christ died
and when the flesh was buried, Christ was buried

-so, in fact, *we believe with the heart unto righteousness, and so we confess
with the mouth unto salvation (Rom, 10,10),-*

in the same way, when the flesh came from death to life, Christ came to
Life,

and, because Christ is the Word of God, Christ is the Life.

Thus, in a certain amazing and ineffable way,
he who has never abandoned or lost himself, comes to himself.

Now, as has been said, through the flesh God had come to men,
the Truth to the untruthful,

for God is truthful; *every man, however, a liar (Rom 3,4).*

Therefore, when he withdrew his flesh from men and raised it to where
no one lies,

He raised up his flesh; he himself in person, because the Word became
flesh,

through himself, that is, through the flesh,
he returned to the Truth, which is he himself.

By the way, even in death he preserved this Truth, although among liars:
at a certain time Christ was dead, but at no time was he false.